1. Women's writing in twenty-first-century France: introduction

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At the beginning of the new millennium and into the second decade of the twenty-first century, women's writing in French continues to be a fertile field of study for both teaching and research in the U.K., the U.S., Canada, Europe and beyond. The first texts of the so-called 'new generation' of young French writers of the 1990s – Christine Angot, Nina Bouraoui, Marie Darrieussecq, Virginie Despentes, Ananda Devi, Marie NDiaye, Marie Nimier, Lorette Nobécourt, Amélie Nothomb – have expanded into mature bodies of work, and some exciting new authors, worthy of wider interest, have come to the fore, such as Chloé Delaume, Claudie Gallay, Anna Gavalda, Véronique Olmi and Laurence Tardieu.[1] *Women's Writing in Twenty-First-Century France* takes stock of the first decade of the new century, identifying and exploring its key trends and issues. While some of the themes and literary techniques appearing in the 2000s expand upon what has gone before, others take altogether different directions and forge new ground.[2]

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[1] This is not to say that the writers cited began publishing in the decade in which they became well-known, especially to readers outside France – NDiaye and Devi first published in the 1980s, Olmi and Gavalda in the 1990s – but, rather, that they did not begin to attract substantial critical and scholarly attention until later.

[2] See Fallaize 1993 for an invaluable introduction to 1970s and 1980s French women's writing to an English-speaking audience. On the 1990s generation of women authors, see Jordan 2004; Morello and Rodgers 2002; Rye and Worton 2002; Rye 2002, 2004, 2005; Sarrey-Strack 2002.

It might be thought no longer necessary in the third millennium to privilege the work of female writers. The point of much feminist literary analysis may well have been achieved and women authors are now arguably an integral part of the mainstream. Yet it is our (feminist) position that the study of writing by women offers crucial – and unparalleled – insights into women's lives, experiences and creativity, as well as into their perspectives on a range of issues. By means of overviews, comparisons and single-author or single-text readings, this collection of essays critically analyses the ways in which women writers are responding to and reflecting upon women's experiences in a rapidly changing world. As the title implies, and for reasons of coherence, the volume focuses on the work of authors who live and work in metropolitan France, rather than considering a wider body of literature written in French. It does, however, include the work of writers who have migrated, who are of mixed race, or who only partly live or work in the metropole, thus reflecting the composition of multi-cultural twenty-first-century France

While the rationale behind this volume is to explore themes and strategies raised in writing, the two chapters immediately following our introduction relate in different ways to the interrelated and important issue of readership. Lynn Penrod's chapter reminds us of the role of translation in canon-formation. Likewise scholarly work. Although, as editors and contributors, we do not claim to identify the classics of the future, it is nonetheless part of our aim to bring particular authors and works to the attention of a wider public. Diana Holmes's chapter focuses on popular, bestselling literature and, although there is some crossover between bestsellers and titles considered to be literary, her recognition of the success of middlebrow works in

France is a salutary reminder that the experimental texts which often attract scholarly attention are not always commonly read by non-academic readers. As the chapters in this volume disclose, reading literature of all kinds encourages us to think, evaluate and imagine, and thus shapes our social and cultural values.

In the handful of years that precede and succeed the turn of any century, a charged atmosphere tends to prevail, on the one hand characterised by a sense of crisis and precarious hurtling towards uncertain futures, on the other curiously, inevitably, intermingled with hope, excitement and the opening out of new horizons. The vibrancy of this ambient turn-of-the century flux gives rise to important critical debates and a rich seam of artistic endeavours that engage with the immediacy of the now and project themselves into realities to come. But it also provides an opportunity to look back, to take stock of the past, to reconsider our relationship to the historical events that have structured, and continue to inform, our political, social and cultural lives. This panoramic perspective can only have been magnified by our most recent turn of the century, the threshold into not only a new century but a new millennium.[3]

In this sense, the return to history that Colin Davis and Elizabeth Fallaize (2000: 13) identify in their consideration of French fiction in the 1980s is amplified in the twenty-first century. The legacy of the Second World War and the Algerian war of independence continue to be central themes in French literature more broadly, and they are increasingly being taken up in women's writing. This is a significant new development: since the explosion of published writing by women in France in the

[3] See Cruickshank 2009 for an analysis of the aesthetics of crisis in French fiction at the turn of the millennium.

1970s, authors have tended to focus on the creation of individual female voices (Cixous 1975; Cixous and Clément 1975), to explore female subjectivity and family relations through psychoanalytical perspectives (Cardinal 1975) or to harness the specificity of female experiences such as adolescence, sexuality, marriage and motherhood within socio-cultural contexts (see, for example, the early work of Annie Ernaux), rather than to look back to collectively experienced historical events. However, as Nathalie Morello and Catherine Rodgers (2002: 36) observe, this recent return to history carries a particular gendered inflection in female-authored works, in which the historical is inextricably bound up with the personal. In the twenty-first century, new perspectives are being brought to bear on historical events and their intervention in private lives and personal identities. Lucille Cairns identifies in this volume an emerging body of work that voices the experiences of the wartime *enfant caché* (hidden child) in contemporary Jewish women's writing, that not only illuminates the socio-political implications of Vichy collaboration, genocide and exclusion, but also raises intimate questions about childhood, gender and trauma, and importantly, about testimony (see also Cairns 2011). Bearing witness to the past, as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's (1992) influential work has shown, enables the communication of traumatic experience and a healing process in which the reader participates.

What is particularly striking about this recent trend is the now relatively advanced age of authors producing first-hand accounts of this period in history and of their encrypted secrets of the past. This revisiting of past traumas after a prolonged period of time is also visible in another body of work, signalled by Susan Ireland in this volume, that speaks of the wounds borne by the *harkis*, the Algerians who worked

for the French army during the war of independence, which have been until recently shrouded in silence. In such works, testimony is filtered through a new generation, who bears witness not only to their parents' untold stories, but to the impact on their families who carve out differently oriented, gendered accounts of the past. Testifying to historical events in the twenty-first century is thus opened out beyond the immediacy of the first-hand witness experience, mediated through time, memory and a sense of haunting that now carries through to future generations.[4]

Alongside this increasing tendency to revisit the past, women's writing in French in the first decade of the new millennium continues, in the vein of previous work by authors such as Cardinal, Ernaux, Danièle Sallenave, Leïla Sebbar, Paule Constant and Sylvie Germain in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, to be firmly committed to exploring the dynamics of its present social, political and economic realities. Over the last half of the twentieth century, French society has undergone massive social transformation and diversification, yet religion, race and immigration remain particularly charged areas in the twenty-first century, evidenced most recently by the killings in Toulouse which dominate the news at the time of writing. The roles that religious and cultural signs, symbols and clothing play in French society have been hotly debated over the past decade, culminating in the 2011 ban on Islamic face veils.[5] The twenty-first-century French state continues to pride itself on a secular stance, but one that may arguably eclipse the particularity of ethnic, cultural and religious identities and disavow deeply entrenched and deeply problematic attitudes towards

[4] See Hirsch 1997 and 2012 for critical perspectives on family, trauma and second-generation testimony.

[5] See A. Kemp 2010 for a discussion of Islam and feminism in French culture.

difference and minority groups.[6] These embedded and often internalised attitudes towards difference are underscored in Andrew Asibong's contribution to this volume, where the staking out of racial identity in a short story by Marie NDiaye is complexly bound up with negotiating false selves, blank recognition and negative hallucination.

The French state's desire to uphold the Republican logic of universalism that assumes all citizens to be the same and equal, and minimises the recognition of difference, has obvious implications for the questions of sexual difference with which this volume is particularly concerned. The relationship between universalism and equality with regard to women's position in society re-emerged with vigour in the French political sphere, with the *parité* (equality) debates of the late 1980s and 1990s (Célestin, DalMolin and Courtivron 2003). This led to a new equality law focused on representation in June 2000, less than a year after the introduction of the *Pacte civil de solidarité* (civil partnership) law, which arguably set the new millennium in France off on a path to rejuvenate existing gender and sexual politics. Feminism has gained a renewed sense of activity and activism, with groups such as Mix-cité, Les Sciences-

[6] Literary critics in France have made their own intervention here, calling for a *littérature-monde en français* (world literature in French). Disillusioned with the notion of *francophonie*, which arguably relegated the work of non-metropolitan authors writing in French to the margins, it calls for such works – in all their multiplicity and diversity – to be recognised within the mainstream of French literature. See *http://www.etonnants-voyageurs.com/spip.php?article1574*, and also Le Bris and Rouaud 2007. For a critical response, see Hargreaves, Forsdick and Murphy 2010.

Potiches se Rebellent, Les Pénélopes, Ni Putes, Ni Soumises and Chiennes de Garde leading the fights against economic and legal discrimination, harrassment and violence against women. Such groups have also begun to integrate their work into broader issues, including domestic *parité*, as well as international concerns such as globalisation or the situation of women within fundamentalist cultures (Célestin, DalMolin and Courtivron 2003: 7). This would seem to suggest that French feminism in the twenty-first century has begun to address multilayered concerns and to engage with questions of composite identities. Yet issues such as domestic *parité* nonetheless still tend to be problematically inscribed within a heterosexist logic.

Gay and lesbian rights have increasingly come to the fore over the last decade in the French political sphere, and their visibility has perhaps been enabled by the election of the openly gay Bertrand Delanoë as mayor of Paris in 2001. But more political work is required to achieve equality and agency for individuals who identify in a spectrum of non-heterosexual positions, be they lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-, queer or other, and to recognise the changing dynamics of relationships beyond heteronormative patterns of the couple and/or the family. Same-sex marriage has yet to be legalised, for example, and until 2009 transexuality was still pathologised as an illness. Here French feminist theory and women's writing would seem to be advancing important work, forging new discourses that articulate a range of gendered positions and sexualities. Feminist and queer theorists in the English-speaking world who have formulated gender and sexuality through poststructuralist or postmodern perspectives may have taken longer to filter through to French feminism (evidenced by the fact that it took fifteen years before Judith Butler's otherwise hugely influential *Gender Trouble* (1990) was translated and published in France). Yet over the last

decade, the influence of such thinkers (Butler; Grosz 1994; Braidotti 1994, 2002; Haraway 1991, 1996) can be discerned in the French context and would appear to be generating new French feminisms. Virginie Despentes's feminist manifesto, *King Kong théorie* (2006) (*King Kong Theory*), is a prime example here: rather than searching for authenticity or an arguably essentialist difference, in the manner of feminist manifestos of the 1970s, this text is more preoccupied with multilayering, diversity, hybridity and transgression.[7] Beyond the category of femininity, radically non-essentialist queer perspectives are mobilised in the work of authors such as Anne Garréta, for example, whose moves beyond conventional feminism are analysed in Owen Heathcote's contribution to this volume.

The family still occupies a prominent position in female-authored texts in the twenty-first century, with questions of mothering that reveal deep-seated assumptions about gender continuing to take centre stage. Yet, changing family practices (single-parent families, multiple family configurations post-divorce, single-sex parenting, group parenting), as well as new reproductive technologies (IVF, artificial

[7] The example of Despentes here carries an obvious feminist agenda, and it must be acknowledged that feminist positions are not always so explicitly embraced in female-authored works – ambivalent or controversial attitudes towards feminism have been apparent since the 1990s in French women's writing, as A. Kemp's chapter in this volume suggests (see also Jordan 2004). But this ambivalence may also evidence the extent to which feminist concerns have become either implicit (Morello and Rodgers 2002), or renegotiated within poststructuralist paradigms (Damlé 2011).

insemination, surrogacy),[8] availability of contraception and abortion, and increased adoption possibilities, have all contributed to the reshaping of family patterns (Rye 2009a: 15–16). In particular they have allowed for new configurations of the sedimented relationship between femininity and mothering by creating opportunities for choice and control over mothering decisions. In twenty-first-century women's writing, narratives of mothering (Rye 2009a) have emerged which increasingly take on the mother's perspective rather than the previously dominant daughter's view, thus lending a further agency to motherhood. While some are concerned with the intimacy and positivity of the mother-child bond, others reveal more ambivalent attitudes and the darker side to mothering. Natalie Edwards's contribution to this volume highlights one extreme of this tendency in its consideration of fictional mothers who have committed infanticide and whose voices we carry an ethical injunction to hear for what they reveal about the desperate situations they find themselves in, but also for what might be disclosed about contemporary attitudes towards mothering and female identity.

However, in twenty-first-century women's writing, consideration of family relations is no longer entirely focused on the figure of the mother. Representations of fathers, as well as fathers as narrators, have come to the fore, as evidenced by Lori Saint-Martin's chapter in this volume. Such narratives often signal a desire to reconnect, from the father's or child's perspective, in a world where family relations are increasingly estranged. Elisabeth Roudinesco's (2002) polemical study of the family 'in disorder' analyses, through a variety of theoretical perspectives, the

[8] Surrogate motherhood is illegal in France, although it is practised, either unofficially or through arrangements overseas.

evolution of the concept of the family in the contemporary climate, tying familial estrangement into the demise of patriarchy and the rise of the feminine. While Roudinesco calls for the symbolic reinvention of the family, Marie-Claire Barnet astutely insists upon the plural form – families – that would adequately reflect the realities of new postmodern 'tribes' in twenty-first-century France, rather than reinstate the sacrosanct ideal of 'the' family (a concept which has arguably not been as stable in the past as Roudinesco wants to argue) (Barnet and Welch 2007: 13). In its engagement with different elements of family life beyond the ambivalent mother-daughter relationship, women's writing in the new millennium thus suggests that family might be productively viewed as an ongoing 'practice' rather than a unified, or unifying, construct.

In the twenty-first century, identity, too, is increasingly wrested away from unified, stable positions. Where poststructuralist and postmodern perspectives have been viewed in the past with suspicion, as a fracturing of female specificity before it has been fully shored up (Irigaray 1977: 139), women writers in the third millennium are engaging in productive ways with the precarious nature of identity. Whether viewed through more conventional psychoanalytical paradigms, or through new interventions in critical thought, numerous studies on French women's writing have identified a focus on a subject that is somehow other than itself or uncanny (Asibong and Jordan 2009; Bragard and Ravi 2011; Connon 2010; Hutton 2009), a plural, shifting subject (Edwards and Hogarth 2010; Edwards 2011), a subject that hovers in in-between spaces (Caine 2003; Thumerel 2004), a subject that 'becomes' (Damlé 2013, forthcoming). The wealth of literary texts and cultural criticism within postcolonial contexts in recent years has tremendously influenced writing more

broadly, and has, as Simon Kemp (2010: 13) has suggested, altered the character of the French novel. This is particularly evidenced by the seepage of postcolonial vocabulary into cultural criticism, with metaphors of hybridity (Rye 2004), displacement (Edwards and Hogarth 2008) and nomadism (Lasserre and Simon 2008; Damlé 2011) evoking the idea that subjectivity, in the twenty-first-century climate of unprecedented globalisation and technological development, is always already deterritorialised, set apart and elsewhere. Hybrid, nomadic, displaced subjects are never at home, or entirely at ease, as Ashwiny O. Kistnareddy's contribution to this volume suggests in its analysis of different positions of hybridity in Ananda Devi's work. Yet, there is an increasing feeling in women's writing in French that this flux and displacement might open out more enticing, enabling glimpses into female embodied experience. Indeed alongside notions of deterritorialisation, there is also a sense that subjectivity might be *re*territorialised, within particular environments, that the very tissue of the self might be interwoven with place and space (see Barnet and Jordan 2010), as an embodied relation to and in the world. In an analysis of Nina Bouraoui's work, Helen Vassallo's chapter in this volume underscores this idea and explores the role that (life-)writing itself plays in the interweaving of the embodied self with her particular environment.

Such notions of embodiment signal the ways in which women's writing in the new millennium continues to challenge the Cartesian duality of mind and body, instead folding and enfolding mind and body into one another. Rather than representing a passive shell that encases identity, the body marks the point where the intimacy of the real touches the fabric of the symbolic, desire branches out towards the other, where boundaries are permeable and malleable. The complex negotiation of

the body through the gaze of the other takes on ever-increasing pertinence and new meanings, however, in the contemporary 'hyperreal' climate, in which technological developments and a media-fuelled preoccupation with image reinforce visual and virtual means of representation and processes of signification. In such an environment, the possibilities for the appearance, reappearance but also the disappearance of the body are more boundless than ever before. The implications of the ensuing tension between embodiment and disembodiment in terms of gender, politics and representation can be seen in the increasing prevalence of anorexic experience in contemporary Western society, a concern that is raised in Amaleena Damlé's contribution to this volume. These articulations of disembodiment also point to ongoing anxieties about the body, its vulnerability and its mortality. In 1970s and 1980s, authors such as Cixous, Chantal Chawaf, Annie Leclerc and Marie Redonnet sought to celebrate the rhythms and plenitude of the female body in writing. Yet, since the 1990s, illness, death and trauma have surfaced as corporeal themes that expose the darker side to female corporeal experience (see Robson 2004), and reflect a wider trend of witnessing texts and 'wound culture' (Seltzer 1997). These elements are still very much present in the twenty-first century, in Ernaux's literature that revisits death and illness, in Ananda Devi's writing that considers abuse and suffering, in Despentes's work that exposes violence and rape.

In the 1990s, the French cultural scene witnessed an explosion of female-authored texts in which desire and sex were presented in much more provocative and pornographic terms that contrast with the safer, affirmative spaces of female desire evoked by Cixous and others. From excessive desire in Alina Reyes, violence and viscerality in Despentes, Christine Angot's ongoing narratives of incest, Sophie

Calle's invasions of privacy, to the catalogic enumeration of sexual acts in Catherine Millet or Catherine Cusset, the explicit exposure of female sexuality has been at the forefront of French culture (see Best and Crowley 2007). Though women's writing in the twenty-first century continues to highlight female desire, it appears to enable a spectrum of desiring positions, rather than focalise around one explicit pole. It is interesting to observe, for example, ten years after Millet's *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* (2001) (*The Sexual Life of Catherine M.*), the publication of *L'Envie* (2011) (*Desire*) by Sophie Fontanel, an autofictional text that proffers chastity as a new form of sensual pleasure.[9] And between these two extremes, desire is multiply opened out in twenty-first century-women's writing, in a visible 'return to romance' (Holmes 2006) and to affective relations that is apparent in writing by, for example, Camille Laurens. Recent engagement with transgressive female desire would seem to nuance the previous decade's rather more detached provocations, taking the form of a more confessional and intimate, even if irreverant, exposure, as Barbara Havercroft's contribution to this volume evidences in its exploration of the work of Angot and Reyes. Where in twentieth-century women's writing, lesbian desire is reinscribed beyond heterocentric configurations of sameness and difference (see Cairns 2002a and 2002b), the twenty-first century sees desire become a vital force in non-heteronormative contexts that collapses binary oppositions of homosexuality and heterosexuality (see Damlé 2013, forthcoming). If such articulations of desire go some way to destabilise sexual binaries, a great deal of women's writing nonetheless still (necessarily) insists on a – to some extent – recognisable female subject. In Anne Garréta's work, however, as Heathcote's contribution in this volume reveals, sexual subjectivity reaches beyond identifiable categories, becoming fluid, and amorphous.

[9] With thanks to Alice Blackhurst for drawing this text to our attention.

Such elements in women's writing that reinscribe desire within queer contexts thus importantly disclose new modes of ethical engagement with the other in twenty-first-century sexual politics.

Creative innovation has been a hallmark of women's writing in French since Cixous's call for an avant-garde *écriture féminine* that might circumvent or 'deconstruct' masculine representation (Cixous 1975; Cixous and Clément 1975). However, new literary strategies wielded by women writers in the twenty-first century can be read alongside broader trends in French literature of the 'extreme contemporary', described by Warren Motte (2008: 15) as the undefined terrain of the now as it perpetually escapes from us (see also Havercroft, Michelucci and Riendeau 2010). The return to the story signalled by Davis and Fallaize (2000) is a notion that has been taken up in a great deal of literary criticism in recent years (S. Kemp 2010: 1–2), as indicating a move beyond the often opaque formal innovations of the *nouveaux romanciers*, the *Oulipo* and *Tel Quel*. Yet, as Simon Kemp points out, this return should neither suggest that the story was entirely absent from previous experimental literature, nor suppose that the new generation of writers has no suspicions about conventionally formal aspects such as plot, character and mimesis. The 'fables' of the novel that Motte discusses in literature of the extreme contemporary are fabular in the sense that they fable *themselves*. Alongside displaying a greater degree of narrativity, contemporary novels in some way self-reflexively

draw attention to the status of the novel, its limits and its possibilities (Motte 2003: 6).[10]

In the work of women writers in the twenty-first century, this self-conscious approach to storytelling is often highlighted in the blurring of boundaries between the fantastic and the banal and can be seen in the writing of, for example, Darrieussecq, NDiaye and Nothomb (see Hutton 2009). Dislocations in narrative voice (Darrieussecq), or the intervention (and death) of the author as a character in the text (Nothomb) alert the reader to the status of the story *as a story* and to the machinations of storytelling. The death of the author of course provokes the birth of the reader who is often incited to participate actively rather than implicitly in the creative process, being offered the choice between different endings (Nothomb), or being invited to become a character and navigate the story from within (Delaume). In twenty-first century's women's writing, literature and life are collapsed into one another, as Anna Kemp's contribution to this volume reveals, opening out ways of existing otherwise and inhabiting, through art, the plural, and perhaps contradictory, positions of the self that so many female authored-texts are concerned with. Telling stories, and moreover reading stories, as Holmes suggests in this volume, thus becomes a way for female authors, characters and readers to be creatively and pleasurably suspended in the world.

[10] The recurrent notion of 'crisis' in respect of the French novel also arose in French literary criticism in the 2000s, see, for example, Baetens 1999; Dandrieu 2006; Rakocevic 2007.

Life-writing is a genre that has long been associated with female-authored works in their discernible emphasis on the intimate spaces of the self, and twenty-first-century women's writing is no exception. Since the 1980s and into the twenty-first century, Ernaux's social autobiographies, or autoethnographies, and *journaux extimes* have continued to blur – but also to reveal anxieties about – the boundaries between the public and the private, and as Simon Kemp analyses in this volume, between the writerly and the experiencing self. The blurred genre *par excellence*, autofiction, first coined by Serge Doubrovsky (1977), has been subject to renewed critical debate in recent years, as ever-increasing forms emerge which pose new challenges to the precise definition of this term (see Burgelin, Grell and Roche 2010; Colonna 2004; Havercroft and Sheringham 2012; Jeannelle 2009; Jeannelle, Viollet and Grell 2007; Oullette-Michalska 2007). But as Jean-Louis Jeannelle points out, the compulsion to assign a definitive signification to autofiction would seem to undermine the very slipperiness of the genre, and its driving force which resides precisely in a readerly hesitation as to the exact status of the text. Indeed, as Jeannelle concludes, it is this slipperiness that imbues autofiction with its creative and critical possibility, stimulating fertile ground for productive disagreement (Jeannelle, Viollet and Grell 2007: 33–6).

The autofictional genre seems to hold considerable appeal for a great many contemporary women writers (for example, Angot, Bouraoui, Cusset, Darrieussecq, Delaume, Laurens, Régine Robin), and several have produced theoretical accounts of autofiction in relation to their work (Burgelin, Grell and Roche 2010). In spite of this, and as Shirley Jordan (2013a, forthcoming) has noted, there has been a lack of critical approaches to autofiction that take gender into account or situate it within broader

trends in women's (life-)writing. As Jordan aptly observes, autofiction provides women writers with the means to grapple with a range of experiences that have been central to evocations of female subjectivity. These include the splitting of the subject, self-conscious performance, mirroring or doubling, cultural hybridity, displacement, and extremes of experience that resist easy articulation, from excessive desire to traumatic and painful experiences such as anorexia, rape or incest. If, for Doubrovsky, the practice of autofiction enables the reinvention, rather than the reproduction, of life experience (Jeannelle, Viollet and Grell 2007: 64), this would seem to be reflected in the concerns of female authors to recreate in art a plural subjectivity, a subjectivity that might be always already fictionalised, as Chloé Delaume suggests (Burgelin, Grell and Roche 2010: 109). The inflections of gender in the production, consumption and interrelation of female-authored autofictional works seems a vital critical avenue and it will be fascinating to see how this trend develops in years to come in new creative practices and critical discourses in thinking about the relationships between self and text, life and literature.

Some of the most innovative and exciting creative leaps in recent women's writing in French have involved not only the blurring of distinctions within the broader definition of literature, but an opening out of the literary text beyond linguistic confines. Helena Chadderton's contribution to this volume shows how Darrieussecq pushes language to its limits, playing with sound, lay-out and arrhythmic, elliptical syntax to creative immersive texts that challenge the senses to capture the nature of experience all the while metatextually signalling that impossibility. The relationship between word and image in the communication of experience has contributed to what Shirley Jordan terms a visual swell in women's

writing in the twenty-first century. Authors such as Ernaux, Laurens and NDiaye have all recently incorporated photographic texts into their writing, raising a host of questions about the possibilities and limitations of these different forms of representation, and what they might reveal or conceal about the self, in particular with regard to memory and notions of the real. Jordan's contribution to this volume also indicates that the graphic novel, which draws on comic-strip book techniques that might conventionally be associated with action-driven, male-centred, plots, is increasingly being manipulated in female-authored works that deal with more difficult, intimate concerns, an area that is beginning to attract sustained critical attention (see Edwards, Hubbell and Miller 2011; Miller 2007). What these innovations appear to have in common is a desire for the literary text to tap into a broader range of sensory responses. This is particularly brought into a twenty-first-century context by writers such as Robin and, as discussed in Deborah B. Gaensbauer's contribution to this volume, Delaume, who engage with multimedia installations and the cyberworld endlessly to refashion the self, interfacing text with image, sound, and the plane of the virtual. In a world of facebook, twitter and blogging, the processes of self-narrative are widely available on some level and an everyday practice for many. Through their engagement with the possibilities of virtual interaction, the textual innovations of Delaume and others highlight, within the particularity of our twenty-first-century world, the suspension into immediate contact with other selves, other lives, and other forms of expression, the pleasures of identification and the dynamic spaces of exchange that the act of reading has always involved.[11]

[11] On reading as a dynamic process, see, for example, Barthes 1984; Felman and Laub 1992; Pearce 1994 and 1997; Rye 2001; and Wilson 1996.

As we can see, fascinating new elements are surfacing in the twenty-first century: hopeful themes – ethics, creativity, relations with the other – and textual and aesthetic experiments – written, visual and virtual. The volume thus not only demonstrates how women's writing is engaging with and intervening into contemporary issues in a changing socio-political, globalised and technological era. It also explores ways in which literary debates are in the process of being shaped. The chapters that follow chart that journey.